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Chapter 5
Emancipation through the Press:
The Women's Movement and its Discourses
on the "Women's Problem" in Sudan
on the Eve of Independence (1950–1956)

Introduction

In 1950, members of the radical left founded two newspapers in Sudan:[1] *al-Shaʾb*
("The People") and *al-Ṣarāḥa* – a title that might be translated as "frankness" or
"honest blunt speaking."[2] A short time later, their editors created columns for
women, most of which were written by female journalists. These columns appeared
with increasing frequency during the tumultuous period leading up to the coun-
try's independence, especially after 1952, the year the Sudanese Women's Union
was founded. The general story behind the foundation of the women's movement
is fairly well known (Hall 1977; Brown 2017; Sharkey 2003a; Hale 1997; Anis 2001;
Ibrahim 2010; al-Gaddāl 2016; al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2017). This chapter focuses
on its first steps through the traces it left behind in the press by considering two
interrelated issues: first, the considerable, if not radical, discursive change in the
debates around gender relations, the "problems of women," and women's role in
Sudanese nation-building; and second, the connection between the female jour-
nalists and their reading and listening public. In fact, the texts on "women's issues"
(*nisāʾiyyāt*) impacted the sensibilities of a far wider gendered audience than just
the men and women who were actually capable of reading these columns, trigger-
ing a shift in gender relations with regard to both representations and practices.

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1 An earlier and shorter version of this chapter was published in French (Vezzadini 2020). I thank
the two reviewers for their input and help in improving it, as well as Iris Seri-Hersch for her
thoughtful comments and careful reading.
2 The translation of these articles in Arabic from the Sudanese press of 1950s is no simple under-
taking and I began the task many years ago. I would particularly like to thank two scholars for their
valuable linguistic assistance over the years: Arabic literature professor Aziz El Aloui (University
of Paris 8) and Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Qādir, a language specialist based in Omdurman. A note on the
transliteration of names: I have chosen to adopt the Sudanese form of common Arabic names: thus,
Khālda and not Khālida, and ʿAzza and not ʿAzīza.

In order to build this argument, this chapter will follow two different directions. The first involves a description and analysis of gendered readership in what was a politically very intense context in which changes occurred at a very fast pace, much more quickly than the colonial rulers had expected. In 1950, few Sudanese would have imagined achieving partial independence just three years later, and full independence in 1956. The first part of this chapter therefore describes the political situation, the landscape of the nationalist political press during these years, the approach of the press to gender issues and the readership and its gender and class differences, and concludes with a discussion on the impact of the press on the construction of gendered political sociabilities. It will also present the sociological profiles of the female journalists and members of the women's movement.

The second topic of this chapter is the discourses on women's role in nation-building and how they changed over time. It is my belief that the changes were not just connected to political developments, but were also made possible by the fact that female journalists were 'educating' their readers to accept their presence in the political arena and to consider their voices to be legitimate. Article after article, drop by drop, readers and listeners became more acquainted with women's voices, which also allowed these voices to become bolder. This theme is developed in the second part of this chapter, which is much longer than the first so that adequate space can be dedicated to these texts.

I have made a conscious decision not to connect discourses on the "women's question" in Sudan with those that had begun to circulate (rather earlier) in the Arab world in relation to the development of nationalist movements there; these have been thoroughly studied in seminal secondary literature, for instance on Greater Syria and Egypt, not to mention other imperial contexts such as Bengal or Nigeria.[3] This is not because such a comparison is uninteresting or superfluous; rather, it is because so little is known about women's intellectual and social history in Sudan at the time of independence that I have preferred to use the limited space available in this chapter to prioritise the study of the historical press and the light it casts on gender relations.

A final element of discussion concerns my sources. The bulk of them consists in about fifty articles from three newspapers – *al-Ṣarāḥa, al-Shaʿb* and *al-Raʾy al-ʿĀmm* ("The Public Opinion") – that were published during the period in question (1950–1956), and are kept at the National Records Office (NRO) of Sudan. They have been supplemented with the sparse secondary literature on the women's

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3 A selection of works: on Greater Syria, see Thompson (2000); on Egypt, see Baron (2007, 2010); Badran (2001); Badran and Cooke (2004); on Bengal, see Sen (1993, 1997); Sarkar T. (1992); Sarkar M. (2001); and on Nigeria, see Lindsay (1999) and Oladejo (2019).

movement and with the memoirs and essays published by leading female activists of the 1950s (Ibrāhīm 1985, 1996; Maḥmūd 2008; Badrī 2002, 2009; Amīn 2011). However, the use of historical newspapers raises a number of methodological questions for social history, especially considering that there were very few male readers in Sudan – and still fewer female ones – at that time. In other words, why should we bother about the press? Does this attention to texts not risk increasing the historiographical over-representation of the literate elites, thereby contributing to the marginalisation of other histories and other actors? This debate hints at the unresolved tension between social and intellectual history, which has been much debated among historians (see for example: Wickberg 2001; Weiss 2019; Hunt 2014). However, a history of readership in Sudan at the time will hint at the fact that the press was not an instrument by and for the elites; instead, it was truly the voice of the various actors in the political arena, which experienced an unprecedented opening-up in the 1950s.

1 Gender, the Press and Politics

1.1 Politics and the Press

Sudan had been under Anglo-Egyptian domination (the Condominium) since 1898, but it moved rapidly towards independence after the Second World War (Daly 1991; Beshir 1974). In 1952, a coup d'état in Egypt by the Free Egyptian Officers brought Muḥammad Nagīb to power (followed by Gamāl ʿAbd al-Nāṣir). Nagīb renounced Egypt's sovereignty over Sudan, an act that rendered its status as a Condominium void, and as a result of powerful pressures from Sudanese political parties and political mobilisation, Great Britain was forced to bring its domination to an end. Accordingly, on 12 February 1953, the last Anglo-Egyptian treaty was signed sanctioning a three-year transition period within which to transfer power to the Sudanese. On 1 January 1956, Sudan became the first sub-Saharan African country to gain independence.

From the time of the end of the war, the local political scene began to simmer and grow in complexity. There were two large so-called "traditional" parties, the Umma Party (founded in 1945) and the National Unionist Party (the NUP, which founded in 1952, although an older pro-Khatmiyya party, the Ashiqqa, had existed since 1943), each of which was under the patronage of a religious leader: in the former case, it was ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, a descendent of the founder of the Mahdist state (1885–1898), and in the latter it was ʿAlī al-Mīrghanī, the leader of the Khatmiyya Sufi brotherhood (Abu Hasabu 1985). Other political groups emerged

during the same period. For the purposes of our discussion, the most important of these was the Sudanese Movement for National Liberation – which would soon be renamed the Sudanese Communist Party (Ismael 2012). But many others also came into being, including the Liberal Party, which was formed by politicians who were originally from South Sudan, the Socialist Republican Party, the Islamic Charter Front, the Black Block and the Beja Congress (officially created in 1957), to name just a few. This reflects the politicisation of new actors who began to demand representation in the Sudanese political arena (see Moritz Mihatsch's chapter in this book).

Male wage-earning workers, whose intellectuals had a major influence on the women's movement, were among the most significant of these new actors. Following approval of the laws on the creation of trade unions in 1948, unionism underwent a massive expansion. According to a colonial report, the unions recruited between 70,000 and 120,000 members between 1948 and 1950.[4] Between 1948 and 1951, more than 77 unions were founded, including the first women's union (for female teachers, in 1950). The birth of the trade union movement coincided almost exactly with its anti-colonial political radicalisation (Vezzadini 2017), and waves of general strikes and demonstrations paralysed the country.

In direct relation to the political ferment, the press experienced unprecedented development. Every political group sought to establish its own newspaper so it would have a privileged space in which to voice its positions. For example, *al-Sūdān al-Jadīd* ("The New Sudan") was the organ of the Khatmiyya even before the NUP was founded, and *al-Umma* was the voice of supporters of the Mahdī family. In 1951, there were seven daily newspapers and fourteen periodicals in Arabic, plus several foreign language newspapers (Galander and Starosa 1997; Babiker 1985; al-Nūr 2014; Ṣāliḥ 1971). As for male Sudanese wage workers, their voices were expressed by the foundation of papers such as *al-ʿĀmil* ("The Worker"), *al-Ṣarāḥa* and *al-Shaʿb. Al-Ṣarāḥa*, a magazine published twice a week, was created in 1950 and edited by ʿAbdallāh Rajab, a self-taught anti-imperialist intellectual inspired by socialism.[5] *Al-Shaʿb,* a bi-weekly created in 1950, was also close to the unions, but was even more outspoken than *al-Ṣarāḥa.* Another newspaper of reference was *al-Raʾy al-ʿĀmm*, which was founded by Ismāʿīl al-ʿAtabānī in 1945, and was one of the rare daily newspapers that claimed not to be affiliated with any political party. Of a more moderate outlook, it nevertheless occasionally carried articles about the

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4 "Development of Trade Unions in Sudan", in Letter from Robertson to Allen, 1.11.1950, London, LAB 13/480, The National Archives (hereafter TNA), Kew, United Kingdom. See also Fawzi (1957: 92–102).

5 For more information on these newspapers, see Vezzadini (2016). I would like to thank Mahassin Abdul Jalil for talking to me about this magazine for the first time.

labour movement, and also covered the debates on women and nationhood, even though it did not publish any articles signed by female journalists until 1956. Unlike *Al-Sha'b* and *al-Ṣarāḥa*, it did not have a dedicated women's column until the same year. Further research is necessary in order to discover more about the circulation of these newspapers, and how this rose and fell over time. So far, only fragmentary information is available: in the *al-Sha'b* issue of 4 September 1957, we read by chance that it was selling 6,000 copies at the time; and *al-Ra'y al-ʿĀmm* had an estimated circulation of 4,000 copies in 1956 (Kramer *et al.* 2013: 74).

Among the new actors who were beginning to claim a political voice were North Sudanese professional women. I will be discussing their profiles at length below; for now it is sufficient to mention that it is no coincidence that the first women's journal, *Bint al-Wādī* ("The Daughter of the [Nile] Valley", 1946–1949) appeared during this period.[6] However, as we shall see below, this magazine was short-lived. From 1950, it became possible for female journalists to be published in major political newspapers such as *al-Ṣarāḥa* and *al-Sha'b.* Not all were open to women, however, and it was in the pages of the left-wing press that they were able to find space, in line with the editors' ideological opening to female political participation.

1.2 Gendered Readers and Listeners

Today, the printed press is but one among many of the technologies that spread information, but in the 1950s, Sudanese citizens had virtually no source other than the press if they wanted to be informed about international and national news. There were really no alternatives, except for the only Sudanese radio station, Radio Omdurman, which was created in 1940. It only broadcast for a few hours a day, however, few people owned radios, and last but not least, it was an organ of the colonial authorities. It is interesting to note that radio programmes were transcribed and published in a popular magazine called *Hunā Omdurmān*, which shows that in its early years, radio was seen as a technological extension of the press. Unlike Radio Omdurman, the press was a relatively open forum. According to the historian Mahjoub Babiker, the British government adopted a tolerant attitude towards the press from the 1940s. He quotes a circular letter from the Civil Secretary dated 11 March 1944 in which the press was defined as "a valuable safety-valve for the escape of suppressed emotions" (Babiker 1985: 97).

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6 This periodical can no longer be found. For an account of its early days, see Hall (1977). For an anthology of the early female writers, see ʿAbd al-Qādir (1965).

In Sudan, as in many other countries of the Middle East (Ayalon 1995: 154–59), the circulation of newspapers went far beyond those who knew how to read.[7] Reading was a collective activity: once a copy had been obtained, it was read aloud to a small audience in cafés, clubs, stations, markets or private circles. The newspaper was then passed from hand to hand, from one circle of listeners to another, and so a single copy could be read by dozens of people (Ayalon 1995: 158–59). In villages far from the capital that were connected by the railway line, villagers went to the station to wait for newspapers to be delivered.[8] In this way, newspapers were an essential part of the creation of political sociabilities in spite of the high illiteracy rate. It is also worth mentioning that the price of newspapers was very affordable in Sudan: both the bi-weekly *al-Ṣarāḥa* and *al-Shaʿb* cost 10 *milīmāt* in 1950; to give a rough comparative idea, in the "Living expenses of household budgets for 1935–36" notebook, we find that this corresponded to the daily cost of bread.[9] In 1947, the Labour Commissioner to Sudan, Mr Audsley, stated that the monthly pay for "labourers generally"[10] was LE 1.800 (that is, Egyptian pounds) – to which at that time the government added a 70% cost of living allowance, for a total of about LE 3. Considering that each pound was equivalent to 100 piastres (*girsh*, Sudanese Arabic of قرش) and each *girsh* was equivalent to 10 *milīmāt* (sing, *milīm*), we see that the cost of these newspapers was 1 piastre, which seems largely affordable in relation to monthly wages.

Reading was also a social activity for literate Sudanese women: it was customary to read to the rest of the family, and literate women often tried to teach their family circle to read and write. In the case of women, however, this social reading was not performed outside the home. In 1950s Muslim Sudan, segregation between the sexes and relegation of women to the home were strictly enforced in the families of notables, civil servants and officers, and of medium and large merchants. As the women who were able to read and write came overwhelmingly from this group, their reading rituals, of which we know very little besides this segregation aspect, were performed in private. In her recollections, Fāṭima Aḥmad Ibrāhīm, a pioneer of the women's movement, noted that in her family, it was her mother who read the newspaper to her father, who was an educated, pious and politically sen-

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7 The most detailed description of these aural audiences can be found in Ayalon (1995: 154–59); for a comparaison with Turkey, see also Beeley (1970).

8 Information on the social use of the press in Northern Sudan is grasped from the oral accounts of participants in the nationalist movement in the 1920s; see Vezzadini (2015: 51–55).

9 "Living Expenses of Household Budgets for 1935–36", Sudan Archive Durham (SAD) 579/9/19. Sudan underwent an important wave of inflation after the Second World War. This question has been extensively treated by Fawzi (1957), esp. Chapter XI, but see also Serels (2013) and Young (2018).

10 "Note by Mr Audsley, Labour Commissioner, on Sudan", 15/04/1947, FO 371/63088, TNA, Kew, UK.

sitive teacher, every day.[11] On the other hand, I have not been able to find accounts of men reading to their spouses, but considering the number of women who were initiated into politics by their brothers at that time, one might imagine that this included some reading.[12] The home was therefore the place where literate women were politicised, which happened through exposure to the press and contacts with the family circle.

This was not the case for the majority of Sudanese women, however. First, many worked outside their homes, although the existing studies do not allow us to refine our sociological analysis much further than this (Salih 1989; Maglad 1998; Pitamber 1999). Women from the popular classes were visible in many urban public spaces because of the jobs and tasks they performed: for example, domestic workers roamed the streets to fetch fuel or water, while others worked in markets or in the street selling many different handcrafted products, crops or horticulture products, or preparing food and drinks. The public visibility of urban working women was highly stigmatised in the social imaginary of the "middle class": exposing oneself to men's gazes was associated with prostitution and a lack of respectability, and women's work was equated with slavery and/or poverty (Spaulding and Beswick 1995; Sikainga 1996). In the body of texts studied in this research, the idea that women went to work exclusively out of poverty and dire need was a recurring one, as we will see.

As far as it is possible to grasp from the scant available evidence,[13] working women did not socialise or discuss politics with men in public spaces,[14] which means that women had only limited opportunities to listen to the articles that were being read aloud among groups of men. This illustrates the gender and class limitations of politicisation associated with the press: while it may be true that a newspaper's readership extended well beyond members of the elite or middle class, the audience from the popular classes seems to have been essentially male. Working women had limited exposure to the political messages in the press,[15] and only mobi-

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11 Ruwān al-Ḍāmin, Interview with Fāṭima Aḥmad Ibrāhīm, *Al-Rāʾidāt,* al-Jazeera, 9 July 2007. http://tinyurl.com/39nzh5 (May 12, 2022).

12 This point is made in several biographies, such as the interview with Fāṭima A. Ibrāhīm quoted above, and is also mentioned in the story about Khalda Zāhir (Zahir 1997: 21).

13 Mostly taken either from the quoted secondary literature on women at work, or from anthropological studies such as that by Willemse (2007).

14 There is no room here to enter in the debate about the private/public spaces of Middle Eastern women, so I have not problematized these terms in order not to overburden the chapter, even though they merit further discussion. For some contributions, see Thompson (2003), Keddie and Baron (2008), Joseph and Slyomovics (2011).

15 One important exception, which deserves an entire chapter to itself, is high-class prostitutes. According to Heather Sharkey, "some of the women most active in literary activities in the 1930s

lised rarely, at least in the visible sphere of the anticolonial movements. Instead, it was literate women who spoke up in the newspapers, and who left textual traces in the national and press archives.

1.3 *Al-Rāʾidāt*

The first women to acquire visibility in Sudanese politics are still dubbed today by Sudanese as *al-rāʾidāt*, the pioneers, a title that emphasises the collective perception of their exceptional character. One example is Khālda Zāhir (1926–2015), one of the founders of the women's movement. Born in Omdurman, a she founded the first Sudanese women's association, *rābiṭat al-fatayāt al-muthaqqafāt* (the Association of Cultured Girls) in 1946 with Fāṭima Ṭālib Ismāʿīl, who was a pupil of the Teacher Training College in the capital at the time (Muhammad 2012). Khālda Zāhir was one of the first two women to graduate from the Kitchener Medical School as a doctor (Zahir and Zahir 1997).

The unusual nature of her educational career can only be understood if we take a brief detour into women's education in Sudan. Even though it undoubtedly increased in the second half of imperial rule in Sudan (Brown 2017: 48), a well-known British report on education in Sudan affirmed in 1937 that "with the educated Sudanese the gap is becoming unbridgeable between the two halves forming the pillars of home life" (quoted in Brown 2017: 86).[16] In a country that had an estimated population of about ten million inhabitants in 1948 (Niblock 1987: 90), there were just 37 pupils at the only public secondary school for girls in the country (which opened in 1945) in that year, and 265 in 1956 (Beshir 1969: 28; Sanderson 1961: 92). Private schools alleviated the sore lack of places in public schools, and in 1956 Sudanese private (*ahliyya*) intermediary schools included 900 girls (Sanderson 1975: 243). Even at the elementary and primary levels there was huge gap: in 1952, there were 37,443 boys at elementary level in public schools and 9,455 in non-governmental schools, compared with 14,183 girls in public schools and 3,466 in private institutions (*Report on the Administration of the Sudan for the Year 1951–52*: 94–95).

Before the Second World War, the colonial authorities viewed the professional training of women as incompatible with Sudanese society and also as a waste,

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and 1940s had been sex workers who were able to circulate with educated men" (mail conversation, 11 July 2021). A dissertation on the history of prostitution is currently being prepared by Mahassin Abdul Jalil, one of the editors of this book.

16 On the politics of education in late colonial Sudan, especially history teaching, see Seri-Hersch (2018).

because women married early and would not work after marriage. After the war, in part in view of the increasing number of girls passing the entrance exam for the Gordon College who had been educated at private schools (such as Unity High School, Comboni College, and the Coptic School, see Sanderson 1975: 243–44), the government had to acknowledge the birth of a (tiny) group of professional women.[17] However, none of them came from the only governmental secondary school, which was characterised from the start by serious shortcomings in terms of curricula and personnel (Brown 2017: 113). In 1951, all the pupils went on strike to protest against poor teaching and the lack of qualified staff. This historic strike was one of the founding narratives of the women's movement, and involved figures like Fāṭima Aḥmad Ibrāhīm and Ḥājja Kāshif Badrī, who remained at the forefront of the women's movement for their entire lives (Ibrāhīm 1985; Badrī 2009; Brown 2017: 113–117).

In many aspects, the "pioneers" had exceptional profiles. First of all, they belonged to unusual families who were not necessarily part of the established elite of the Sudanese society. For instance, Khālda Zāhir's father was a Darfuri officer who had taken part in the 1924 Revolution. According to Hall (1977: 263) "both Fatima Taleb and Zainab al-Fateh admit to having had exceptionally progressive-minded fathers who believed in girls' education and encouraged their daughters to develop their talents and abilities." Similarly, Khālda Zāhirs's father not only encouraged his daughter to enter the medical profession, which had hitherto been a masculine fief, but also supported her in a number of uncommon choices, such as marrying for love against the advice and wishes of the rest of the family (Zahir and Zahir 1997: 22). In the case of other militants, we know that their families accepted the fact that their daughters would not marry, or would marry late, or chose a man of their choice, contrary to the customs of the time: for example, Fāṭima Aḥmad Ibrāhīm married the well-known trade union leader al-Shafīʿ Aḥmad al-Shaykh in 1969, when she was about 40.[18] Finally, these families accepted their daughters' political exposure. Khālda Zāhir, for instance, was the first woman to join a political party – the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP), which was actually the only one open to women at the time – but she was also the first woman to make a political speech in public and to be arrested for her political activities (Badrī 2009: 176; Zahir and Zahir 1997: 21–22). Some women, such

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17 The first woman was admitted to university in 1945, but ten years later, in 1956, no more than 40 women were registered (Niblock 1987: 134).

18 "Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim Obituary." *The Guardian,* 21 August 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/21/fatima-ahmed-ibrahim-obituary. This newspaper gives 1928 as her year of birth and 1969 as the year of marriage, but elsewhere we find 1930, or even 1933 as birthdates (El Gizouli 2017).

as Fāṭima Aḥmad Ibrāhīm and Ḥājja Kāshif Badrī, also joined the SCP very early on, braving the systematic harassment by local and colonial authorities against it.

On 17 January 1952, ʿĀzza Makkī ʿUthmān organised a meeting to celebrate winning a literary competition on the "women's issue" run by *al-Ṣarāḥa* newspaper (for different versions of this event, see Maḥmūd 2008: 152; Badrī 2009: 176; Brown 2017: 117). This historic meeting became the founding moment of *al-ittiḥād al-nisāʾī al-sūdānī*, the Sudanese Women's Union (SWU). Fāṭima Ṭālib Ismāʿīl was elected as its leader, and Thuriyyā Umbābī as its Secretary. These first participants met again at the end of the month, and formed a fifteen-woman executive committee that also included representatives from the Nurses' Union and the Female Teachers' Union.[19] The prominent role of members of the Nurses' Union in the executive committee was an acknowledgement of their outstanding anti-colonial commitment: in fact, the first women to openly take part in an anticolonial demonstration were female nurses, in 1951. Even the British colonialists saw it as a momentous event. The telegram that described it was entitled: "First Women Demonstrators", and continued, "Nurses at Khartoum Hospitals took part in demonstrations. This is the first time in the history of the Sudan that women have taken part in public demonstrations."[20]

The visibility of women both through the press and by the foundation of the first women's organisation challenged the symbolic gender order of the time. Nafīsa Abū Bakr al-Milīk (born in Rufaʿa in 1932) recounted the social code these women began to break and the violence this provoked. She related that members of the *Ittiḥād* always had to be accompanied when they walked in the streets because men would try to strike them with sticks. When the SWU was founded, none of the members could go to the clerk's office in person to register the association, because no Sudanese women entered public buildings at that time (Maḥmūd 2008: 156). According to Ḥājja Kāshif Badrī, "a woman was not expected to set foot out of the house except on two occasions – one to go to her husband's house after marriage and two, to her grave after death" (Badrī 2009: 71).

The anti-colonial struggle and nationalism offered new tools for shattering female seclusion. The visibility of the militants was justified as having a political objective: it was impossible to join the nationalist movement without being present and visible in it. Devotion to the nationalist cause should not be viewed as being opportunistic, however: at the time, nationalism in all its different forms was an ideology that was shared by all political orientations. However, these mili-

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19 Memories of Nafīsa Abū Bakr al-Milīk, quoted in Maḥmūd (2008: 151–59).

20 Anonymous telegram, 26.8.1951, FO 371/90229, TNA, Kew, UK. Tellingly, the second demonstration was not organised by the Sudan Union but by the Associaiton for Women's Awakening. See the chapter by Safa Mohamed Kheir Osman in this volume.

tants grasped the emancipating potential of this discourse, which enabled them to draw on a repertoire of powerful arguments to refute their invisibilisation in the public realm.

2 Discourses on the Women's Question

2.1 Introduction: From the 1930s to 1950

The female journalists who sought to contribute to the debates about nation-building had to do so amidst a highly misogynistic discursive repertoire. In two seminal articles, the historian Heather Sharkey describes how women's issues were being debated as early as the 1930s (Sharkey 1999, 2003a). In particular, she analyses two famous literary magazines, *al-Naḥḍa* ("The Renaissance", which was published between 1931 and 1932) and *al-Fajr* ("The Dawn," 1934–1937). Despite their opposite political connections, the contributors – who were exclusively male – expressed the same beliefs: women were "obstacles to modernisation" and "symbols of backwardness", and pending the "civilization" of women, there would be no national emancipation (Sharkey 2003a: 64). In other words, women were responsible for the failure of the national project in Sudan. These highly negative descriptions are peculiar if we compare them to other Middle Eastern contexts in which women were central to nationalist myth-making. To give but one famous example, in colonial Egypt, "the peasant woman" was one of the symbols of the nation, incarnating values such as resistance to colonisation, innocence and tradition (Baron 2007: chapter 3). In the Sudanese press of the time, similar female ideal types seem to have been conspicuous for their absence.

The first journalists to sign articles with female pseudonyms appeared in the 1940s. The decision to use pseudonyms was common to much of the women's literature of these times, in the Arab world and beyond (Baron 2007; Booth 2001; Ducournau 2019). It echoes the well-known Islamic saying that "ṣawt al-marʾa ʿawra", "the voice of the woman is nudity" (Salomon 2020: 36), as well as the norm that banned pronouncing the name of a woman publicly.[21] This means that the names of women journalists are hard to identify until 1956.

In a little-known, but fundamental, work because of its access to sources that seem to have been lost, the historian Marjorie J. Hall analysed the beginnings of this women's journalism (1977: 252–53). According to Hall, women journalists in

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[21] This is one of the reasons why women were usually called by the name of the sons (but occasionally also the daughters) they bore, like Umm al-Nūr or Umm Maryam.

the 1940s who contributed to *Bint al-Wādī* focused on the practical problems of the female Sudanese upper and middle class of the time. They gave advice to their readers on issues such as "culinary hints, home and childcare, and the creation of a cordial domestic atmosphere" (Hall 1977: 253); but also the interior decoration of homes, the recommended soft tone of voice to be adopted when speaking to one's husband, and so on (Hall 1977: 252–53). Despite their lightness, these texts all noted that there were problems in the couple, and it was the women who needed to take responsibility for mending them, as it was they who were seen as its cause. Other newspapers and magazines such as *al-Sūdān al-Jadīd*, *al-Kurdufān*, and *Hunā Omdurmān* carried similar articles on women's domestic problems (Hall 1977: 252 sq.).[22] For example, women were chastised for not being able to keep their homes up properly.

Beginning in the period being studied here, as I have mentioned, *Bint al-Wādī* ceased publication, and the female authors now began to target the political press, in parallel with the opening of dedicated columns in *al-Shaʾb* and *al-Ṣarāḥa*. Here, they took the model of older magazines such as *Hunā Omdurmān*, with its *rukn al-marʾa* – woman's corner – but with entirely different themes and lexicon. The story of this appearance is now lost, and it is not possible from the available sources to know how the contacts between the editors-in-chief of *al-Shaʾb* and *al-Ṣarāḥa* and the women who were willing to write political pieces were established. From the start, the writers' objective was to deal with "the problems of the Sudanese woman" (*mashākil al-marʾa al-sūdāniyya*)[23] in the framework of the struggle for national liberation, in the same way as the writers of *al-Fajr* or *al-Nahḍa*. This time, however, women were authors, and not only the objects of the texts.

Several formal elements should be noted about these columns. First, women were not the only contributors – the writers were of mixed genders. Second, they followed a heterogeneous, but frequently dialogic, format, in the sense that several texts took the form of real or imaginary responses to previous column articles, or even articles published in other newspapers or heard on the radio (and transcribed in *Hunā Omdurmān*). Finally, the space offered to these articles was limited – often just two or three columns on one page, and rarely any more than

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22 In the late 1940s, even *Al-Ṣibyān*, which was a weekly pedagogical magazine for children, and which had an exceptional circulation of 10,000 in 1947, and up to 20,000 in 1953, included a double-page targeting female teenagers and women ("*ṣafḥāt Nafīsa*"). It typically included stories on great women, advice on matters of education and marriage, sewing and cooking instructions. See Seri-Hersch (2011: 351).

23 This is the title of the anonymous article published in the column *rukn al-marʾa* in *al-Shaʾb*, 20.01.1951, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

that. Their monthly frequency varied considerably, from two or three in a single month to nothing for several months.

In the following sections, we will examine some of these texts closely, and track their evolution over time, distinguishing two major phases: a first marked by what I call a subversive mimesis (sections 2.2 and 2.3); and a second marked by open opposition (section 2.5). In between, I will also illustrate the position of some progressive male intellectuals with regard to "the woman's question" (section 2.4) and their role in the evolution of political sensibilities.

2.2 The "Candid Girl"

When the columns by female journalists began to appear in political newspapers, the theme of the role of women in the process of national liberation became – once again – central to the debate, as had been the case with the journalistic discourses of the 1930s. The writers accused "the Sudanese woman" of being responsible for the country's dire state. However, in spite of the apparent proximity between these and earlier discourses on women, profound differences soon became discernible.

On 18 April 1950, the first article in the *nisāʾiyyāt* (women's issues) column appeared in *al-Ṣarāḥa*. It was written by *fatā ṣarīḥa*, a "candid girl", who edited the column for its entire first year. The opening article, which was entitled "Hey man! Hey woman!", was a lengthy text that stated the programme, mission and objective of this literary space.[24] The "candid girl" addressed both "the Man" and "the Woman," and explained their roles in the development of the country. Addressing "the Man" first, she begged "him" to raise the level of women:

> You, who are aspiring to freedom and glory, you who are seeking a happier and more luxurious life, do you know that your wings are still broken? And that you will not be happy and fly in the world of freedom unless your wings are safe? These questions are addressed to you, Sudanese man, as your state is akin to that of a bird with a broken wing.
>
> You have reached a remarkable level of sophistication [*ruqā*], you know your obligations and your rights and you try to raise the level of your country, then you seek a freedom that only those who truly understand it deserve to get. Indeed, you can be a skilful politician or a competent administrator, but you are still to a certain extent paralysed. And you will never obtain what is yours completely unless you remedy this deficiency – which you already know, is the backwardness [*taʾakhkhur*] of woman, or your broken wing.
>
> This vile creature [*makhlūqa dhalīla*], who is ordinarily imprisoned in her own home, toiling under the burden of slavery – you call her backward [*taʾakhkhur*]. [. . .] You do not trust her,

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24 Fatā Ṣarīḥa, "Ayyuhā al-Rajul, Ayyatuhā al-Marʾa." *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 18.4.1950, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

you oppress her and maybe even more than that, which leads to the disintegration of family ties and the misfortune of the progeny. What is your stance, oh man, regarding that woman whom you've wronged with your behaviour, and who will, from today, raise her voice high complaining through this column, and she will not spare you until she fully restores all her rights, and earns the prestigious position she deserves. [. . .]

And we should all cooperate, women and men, to treat this disease [*dāʾ*], not only towards the backwardness [*taʾkhīr*] of the Sudanese woman but also because there are complicated social issues that are difficult for both women and men to solve if they deal with them separately. From now on, therefore, let us make our slogan "God is with the group." [. . .] And we will create together that highly-esteemed Sudanese woman, the daughter of the Sudan that both you and she dream of, and the mother of future men. Indeed, with this you will raise the status of the Sudanese household and build the glory of this nation.

Then she addressed "the Woman":

Hey, woman, isn't it about time you woke up from your deep sleep [*nawmiki al-ʿamīq*]? Don't you know that you are in the 20th century? The era of the atom? The time of idleness, hesitation and fear is long gone. It's time you did your duty in the best way possible. The age when the worth of a woman was measured by the number of servants surrounding her and how little she moved is now long gone. Wake up from your sleep, as opportunities are now accessible for you. You will have this newspaper through which you can broadcast your complaints and find what interests you, whether you are a wife, a student or a teacher. We will restore your once oppressed rights, not only from the man but from any other entity, whether it be an organization or an individual, and it will uncover what was hidden from you – from customs you believed in, nay, you worshipped. We will clear up for you what is good from what is bad, and so on. And do not be embarrassed to raise your voice high in this newspaper, and do not fear the wrath of man because he will also aid us in our study of this problem, and – God willing – we will not be disappointed in him.

But do not get carried away and think that this column will only contain campaigns against the man, against his oppression, injustice and sometimes narcissism. No, because there will be campaigns against you, to lead you to a happier life, because you are centuries late [*mutaʾakhkhira qurūnan*] compared to the current times, and we will make you catch up to the caravan of civilisation [*sa-nalḥaquki bi-l-qāfila al-mutaḥaḍḍira*]. Trust that we will not turn you into a joke by turning you into a foreigner. We will simply make you a correct, civilised [*mutaḥaḍḍira*] Sudanese woman, no matter how much you gain in knowledge or class. Otherwise, woe unto you!

There are several elements in this text that cannot escape our attention. First, and most obviously, there is the difference in the description of men and women: men are described as capable and skilled, "high" creatures – compared to birds – able to understand the meaning of freedom. At the opposite end there are women, who are described as tardy, retrograde, idle and kept in a servile state. And yet the writer reminds us that women are (partly) in this condition because men "wronged" them by confining them to the prison of the house. In other words, both men and women

are represented as being responsible for the situation. The writer reassures her readers that the column is neither a "campaign against the men," nor an attempt to "foreignize" women – that is, to follow a model of development that is not "Sudanese": elsewhere, she calls women the "daughters of the Sudan." Instead, her aim through the column is the creation of a "correct" [*ṣaḥīḥa*] and modern woman, which for the writers, as the subsequent issues make clear, is a process entirely connected to female education. A second element that comes to light is the core role agency plays in this article. Everybody is called on to be an actor in this reform and to overcome the paralysis that the terrible situation of women can inspire. In spite of their slumber, women are capable of awakening and claiming their rights. The third and last element to note is the metanarrative about the press. For the journalist, *nisāʾiyyāt* is much more than a space by and about women. It is a tool of struggle, a means of fighting for women's intellectual and material conditions, by offering both a place to expose men's abuses, and one where women's inaction and backwardness can be chastised, especially in relation to their "worship" of "bad customs." On the other hand, the editor adopts a patronising – if not denigratory – tone that expresses superiority and condescension in relation to these "slumbering" women, in this way situating herself closer to her definition of masculinity than to the feminine pole.

I will now move on to the question of *al-ʿādāt* – here in the sense of customs, mores –*bāliyya* – obsolete, or retrograde.[25] Some months later, in fact, the "candid girl" began a cycle of articles targeting directly this theme. In one introductory text, she defined them as "a manifestation of backwardness that goes against the development of the human being", adding that "unfortunately there are many of such customs. In reality this limits our society and its freedom and it inhibits the march towards progress [*al-sayr fī ṭarīq al-taqaddumiyya*]."[26] In subsequent issues, she addressed the rituals connected with two momentous times in the life of Muslim Sudanese women: funerals and marriages. In the text dedicated to funeral rituals, she wrote:

> Men, thanks to education, have abandoned most of these obsolete rituals, but women are still holding on to them, and here we can find the vast difference between the funeral settings of men and those of women.

> On the men's side, there reign silence and words of condolence and encouragement, which recall life and death and the fate of all beings.

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25 It should be noted that the theme of female pharaonic circumcision, a practice that was condemned by the British (Boddy 2007), was never directly mentioned in these texts.

26 Fatā Ṣarīḥa, "Al-ʿĀdāt al-Bāliyya [the obsolete customs]." *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 8.9.1950, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

> However, if we cast our sight towards women, we are confronted with the sour truth, the holding tightly on to obsolete [*bāliyya*], heinous [*shanīʿa*] rituals that contradict the teachings of Islam and diminish the strength of the Sudanese community. Therefore, they should be fought and eliminated [*al-qaḍāʾ ʿalayhā*].

> The rituals that women follow are the display of exaggerated sorrow for the death of the departed, a loud and tangible display that, of course, entails practicing the arts of screaming [*ṣurākh*], wailing [*ʿawīl*] and austerity. While performing these rituals, women forget about the relatives of the deceased and the harm that will befall them due to these acts.[27]

The article continues with a negatively charged description of the perniciousness of female burial rituals, which are described as heinous, an absurdity [*sakhāfa*] and ugly [*bashāʿa*], and reveals a competition among the women for the loudest expression of – false – grief. Finally, two solutions for fighting them are proposed by the "candid girl":

> Firstly, men must take a very firm position towards these ceremonies and with the women during these occasions, by not allowing them to perform rituals like "*al-manāḥa*" [the wailing performed at funerals]. This would be a temporary solution to the problem. The second way, and the final solution, will be the spreading of education among women.

Here, much as in the first essay, men are represented as rational and more developed at an intellectual, emotional and moral level, and are contrasted with women's "retrograde" attitudes. The "candid girl" also mobilised gendered religious and racial arguments: the "obsolete customs" recalled those of "some old African tribes", were non-Islamic and were the opposite of the Islam of men, whose behaviour complied with perceived notions of orthodox Islam.[28] On the women's side, the condemnation is definitive, and there is no space for empathy or understanding, except for the women who are the victims of these rituals.

Why did the "candid girl" provide such a derogatory description of women? The misogyny of the first waves of feminist writings is not just a characteristic of Sudan; it is a global trope.[29] Here, I will offer two considerations that are context-specific, however. The first female authors participated in a debate for which

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27 Fatā Ṣarīḥa, "Al-Aṭrāḥ wa-l-ʿĀdāt al-Bāliyya [miseries and obsolete customs]." *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 6.10.1950, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

28 We can also understand this argument in the light of the Islamic reformism that was becoming increasingly common in the urban centres of Muslim Sudan through institutions such as the Islamic Courts (Ibrahim 2008). Nevertheless, it should be observed that in the sample studied, religious arguments never become central; rather, they are mobilised as one among many rhetorical 'bullets' used by the movement to stir up readers.

29 To give just two examples, these aspects have been studied in the cases of Simone de Beauvoir (Dietz 1993 and the whole special issue) and Mary Wollstonecraft (Gubar 1994).

the argumentative groundwork had been constructed much earlier, as seen, which had the essential backwardness of women as its premise. Because they were publishing in newspapers by and for men, it is difficult to imagine how these journalists could have carried out a radical departure, when the very fact that felt entitled to write political pieces was a tremendous novelty.

But there was another question, too, which becomes clear if one reconsiders the discussion about the gender of the audience and the profiles of the journalists. We have seen that the majority of Sudanese women had little or no access to the press, and thus had negligible exposure to the political and pedagogic programme that lay behind most publications of the time. The first female journalists were therefore confronted with the thorny problem of how to capture the attention of illiterate women. One solution was to try to reach them through the men in their family circle. For this purpose, they sought to use all possible means to sensitise, move and shake their male audience in order to co-opt them into the mission of modernising women. This explains certain mystifying features of the articles during this first period, in particular the fact that in many texts, female journalists – and not only the "candid girl" – described women's woes from a seemingly masculine point of view.[30]

However, a more radical discourse was already detectable between the lines of the same article, one that questioned the responsibility of "the man" for the catastrophic situation of women. This theme came to the fore as early as the second article on women's issues published in *al-Ṣarāḥā.*

2.3 The Oppressed Woman – *al-Marʾa al-Maẓlūma*

The second article in the *nisāʾiyyāt* columns was published only two weeks after "Hey Man, Hey Woman," but was very different from the first. It was an autobiographical account by a narrator who signed herself "the oppressed woman" and who entitled her piece "Oh man, this is how you behaved unfairly towards me."[31]

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30 As in the story, which is quoted at length in Vezzadini (2018), of a man wishing to marry who goes through the ordeal of marriage rituals, and end up being penniless and abandoning his bride. The story, written by a female journalist, is narrated from the point of view of the groom. While she describes the feelings of deception of the man at length, the point of view of the deserted wife is absent from the narration.

31 Al-Marʾa al-Maẓlūma, "Hākadhā Janayta ʿAlayya, Ayyuhā al-Rajul." *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 28.4.1950, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

From the start, the narrator claimed that male domination could ruin the life of a woman: "Perhaps you believe that I am unfair, oh man, if I accuse you of acting unjustly towards me, but my position will become clear to you when I tell you the story of my life, which you dominate in all its phases". Her story continues:

> Since I was a little girl, your domination [*sayṭaratuka*] over me has manifested itself in the image of the father. He forbade me from being educated, because in his view, [education] would spoil me. He then decided to marry me to a husband whom he determined was appropriate, but I do not know what pleased him about that man, whether it was his money or his position.
>
> The man who joined his life to mine does not trust me, and he does not share his life with me, his sweetness and his bitterness. The discord between us moves slowly forward. And I saw my rights taken away from me, and because of this I neglected my duties [as a wife] and became bored with life.

As the story continues, the husband decides to take a second wife, whom he treats very differently:

> You are guilty towards me, oh man, when you are a father and you marry me with this man who knows nothing about the rules of married life, then you are guilty towards me another time in the image of this man who builds a second marriage on the basis of justice as a Muslim. But where is the justice, oh God? Really, he is the man farthest from justice. How huge is the difference between me and the new wife, and how vast is the difference between the children he had with me and his children with her.

Here, the "oppressed woman" contrasts her notion of religious justice – here defined as acting in the true interests and for the well-being of the other – with the justice of the Islamic courts, which legislate over marriages and yet allow such abuses to occur.

Her husband's neglect increases to the point where he abandons her, moves to another city with his second wife and leaves her alone and with no resources, and with responsibility for the children. They grow up restricted and in poverty, do not go to school, and end up "not knowing the taste of life." Only one of them succeeds in securing a respectable position for himself. However, when he marries, instead of taking care of his mother, his new wife chases her out with no objection on her son's part. The article concludes:

> I am now an old woman, and I am shaking this life off my hands so that I can leave it without sadness. I will never know what it means to be helped, since I was little at my father's house, and then at my husband's. [...] My husband showed disrespect to me, and my child repudiated me as a mother. What is left after this? What is worse than this injustice [*ẓulm*] and oppression [*jawr*], oh man?

In this burning condemnation of men's domination over the lives of women, the first-person narrator not only tells her story, but also recounts all her feelings and

emotions in regard to the injustices she has faced throughout her life. This narrative strategy creates an impression of intimacy, as if the writer is surrendering herself to her confidants-readers, saying what lies at the bottom of her soul. In turn, this reinforces the feeling that the story is true, a fact the editor of the column seeks to consolidate with the words "conforms to the original" [*ṭābiq al-aṣīl*] just before the "oppressed woman" signature at the foot of the article. Unlike the majority of other articles in *nisāʾiyyāt*, the story is offered with no introduction or comments on the part of the editor, as if she wished to let the "oppressed woman" speak without filters.

Three months later, the "candid girl" mentioned that she had received a letter from a certain A. A. Muṣṭafā, in which he rejected the "oppressed woman's" accusations.[32] This time, the editor adopted a writing strategy contrary to the one we have just described, seeking to distance the readers by not quoting the letter directly and merely summarising it. She thus reported that Muṣṭafā considered that only "Eve" was responsible for the "unhappiness of the family". The woman was a "speckled snake" [*al-ḥayya al-raqṭāʾ*], unstable [*tamalmul*] and malicious [*dahāʾ*], and she continues:

> He says that a man who does not educate his daughter does so because he himself is not educated, and that if he marries a second time it is because his first wife does not accomplish her duty, and therefore it is unfair to accuse the man of this behaviour since he is just trying to make himself happier. [. . .] Man is innocent of what he is accused of and women are the sole cause of the misery of society and of man and of themselves.

The "candid girl" responded to the letter in this way:

> I believe you should accept the accusations made against men, just as we have accepted that the man is the master of the family and its protector, the one who dominates it, especially because the family situation in our country is different from other countries in relation to the level of women. So if there is someone who has to be held accountable for the unhappiness of a family, would it not be the man?

From this exchange, we can conclude that the "candid girl" was deploying a strategy of subversive mimesis that consisted in showing her adherence to conventional middle class social norms reflected in Islamic family law (Fluehr-Lobban 2013) by accepting the patriarchal order of the household and showing wifely obedience. But while men were the heads of the family, the logical consequence of this was that they were responsible for the well-being of its members as well as providing for their tangible and intangible needs – such as education – in exchange

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32 "Barīd li-l-Fatā al-Ṣarīḥa [letter to the candid woman]." *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 11.7.1950, NRO Khartoum, Sudan.

for their obedience. Precisely through these arguments, it was easy to demonstrate the responsibility of men for the situation of "backwardness" of Sudanese women. Their dire state was a bitter testimony to how men had failed in their patriarchal role. Moreover, this patriarchal organisation was situated in a timeline, which meant that it was not linked to any intrinsic feminine trait, and as such was potentially modifiable.

2.4 "A Historic Day in the Lives of Sudanese Women"

As we have seen, *al-ittiḥād al-nisāʾī al-sūdānī*, the SWU, was founded in January 1952. By then, many progressive male intellectuals had become convinced of the necessity for a women's organisation. An article in *al-Ṣarāḥa* dated September 1951 described a meeting of Khartoum University College[33] students that concluded with a brief speech on the need to found a women's union: "Male and female students took part in the discussion, [. . .] and one of the female students suggested establishing a connection between men and women with the aim of raising the level of women in society."[34] Later on, the various stages that led to the foundation of the SWU were extensively covered by the press. After its birth, all the three newspapers discussed here – including the moderate *al-Raʾy al-ʿĀmm* – devoted laudatory articles to it. *Al-Ṣarāḥa* dedicated the entire front page of its 1 August 1952 edition to various aspects of the women's "problem" alongside the foundation of the new society.[35] The presence of women's issues on the front page of the newspaper was exceptional, because women's columns were generally relegated to the middle pages. The enthusiasm of the press concealed the great difficulties encountered by the "pioneers" in establishing their association and making it work. The militants' memoirs describe a daily struggle to exist as an association and to expand its area of action.

Here, I will focus on a text that is especially illustrative when it comes to understanding these questions. Less than a month after the SWU had been founded, a long editorial appeared in *al-Raʾy al-ʿĀmm* entitled "A historic day in the lives of

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33 The Gordon College was officially renamed Khartoum University College in 1951 and University of Khartoum in 1956.
34 "Qarārāt li-Tanẓīm al-Mujtamaʿ al-Nisāʾī [resolutions in favour of the organisation of the women's society]." *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 25.9.1951, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.
35 The first page of this edition of al-Ṣarāḥa also included a drawing representing women's emancipation, which is commented on by Brown (2017: 126).

Sudanese women."[36] Tellingly, this was <u>not</u> the day on which the SWU was estab-
lished, but a literary evening held at the Students Union Club in Khartoum on 21
February 1952. The event was organised by Muḥammad al-Nuwayhī, an Egyptian
teacher of Arabic literature at the Gordon College[37] who a few months earlier had
launched a literary competition asking writers to write pieces about the role of
women in the Sudanese national movement. The competition was won by ʿĀzza
Makkī ʿUthmān, and the meeting in her home to the celebrate this victory led to the
foundation of the SWU. The evening at the Students Union Club was to be a sort of
continuation of the competition at which the organiser of the evening, al-Nuwayhī,
asked contributors to comment on the statement that "Sudanese women cannot
currently take part in the battle for [national] liberation because of their illiter-
acy." In other words, it was a debate on girls' education. It is important not to lose
sight here of the difference between how participants experienced the evening – of
which we only know fragments – and what was reported in *al-Raʾy al-ʿĀmm*.

Muḥammad al-Nuwayhī started the event off by reviewing the texts sent in
for the literary competition. The newspaper reported that these were all in favour
of women's education. Various suggestions were made as a means of improving
women's situation, such as encouraging their participation in literary clubs and fos-
tering greater involvement in their husbands' social lives as a way of being exposed
to a more stimulating milieu.

Following these first readings, al-Nuwayhī opened the discussion up to those
in attendance. The guests came from the cream of the male intellectual scene, plus
a small number of female members of the SWU (whose names were not reported,
again in contrast to the men, who were all called by their names, as known person-
alities). All kinds of ideological orientations were represented. Saʿd al-Dīn Fawzī,
who at the time was a professor of economics at the University of Khartoum, and
was later to become a celebrated economic and social historian, stated that the
women's movement was not premature, and that it was a sign of the progress of
the country. Then there were positions such as those of al-Zubayr ʿAbd al-Maḥmūd

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36 "Yawm Tārīkhī fī Ḥayāt al-Marʾa al-Sūdāniyya." *Al-Raʾy al-ʿĀmm*, 21.2.1952, NRO, Khartoum,
Sudan.
37 On the intellectual universe of the time to which al-Nuwayhī belonged: Sharkey (1998, 2003b,
2020) and Seri-Hersch (2011). On the fascinating life of this intellectual, see the page dedicated to
him in the Arabic encyclopedia Areq: https://areq.net/m/محمد_النويهي.html (accessed on 10/6/2022).
Born in a small Egyptian village, he became a fervent disciple of Ṭaha Ḥusayn, and was given
the opportunity to earn a PhD in classical Arabic literature at the School of Oriental and African
Studies in London, before travelling back to Egypt and then to Sudan, where he established the
Department of Arabic language at the Gordon College. Several studies have been dedicated to him,
such as Green 1986. Even if it was probably written by Muḥammad al-Nuwayhī himself, the article
was not signed.

and a certain al-Maghribī, both of whom were professors of religious sciences. They made the point that women's education and employment were permitted by Islam, and were even necessary in order to maintain gender segregation, because if a woman fell ill or wished to be educated, it had to be possible for her to be assisted by female professionals. Another *ʿālim* promised that he would develop this position giving an entire lecture on the status of women in the Islamic religion. Other intellectuals debated whether economic development would lead to women's advancement or if it would have to precede it as a precondition. It was only at the end of all the speeches that the floor was handed over to the women of the SWU. The speeches of two of them were reported, and one was described as "the girl of the evening" (*fatāt al-layla*) because of her boldness. She addressed the question of segregation: "the narrow-minded person's fear of mixing [*ikhtilāṭ*] shows that he doubts the strength of the Sudanese woman and lacks trust in her, but it also means that he is accusing the Sudanese man of being dishonest and immoral."

The convergence of opinions described in this text conflicts with Ḥājja Kāshif Badrī's recollections of the same event. She mentions a bitter debate between defenders and opponents of women's education, and the insistence of the opponents on treating it as a religious prohibition: "This was the first time the women had appeared at such a meeting with men to defend their rights. A hot religious debate from the opposition side led by Shawki El Assad took place, as they tried to defend their position through Islamic doctrination [sic]" (Badrī 2009: 179).

Instead, in our article, only one of the participants came out openly against women's education, and it is extremely interesting to observe the narrative strategies used to describe his position. In the first place, he is – tellingly – nicknamed as "*al-rajʿī*", "the reactionary", which is also the title given to the paragraph. Second, the paragraph in question is very short, and starts directly by stating: "The public at the event disagreed straightforwardly [*ṣarīḥa*, from the same root as the newspaper title] with professor Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-Shaykh." It then goes on to list his ideas, which were to limit education for women, strengthen and give priority to religious education and avoid mixing between men and women.

This sheds light on the literary strategies put in place by the progressive press for setting the stage for a fiction, that of the existence of a general consensus around the women's question. First, the author placed the only truly dissident opinion outside the discourse through a series of narrative strategies that deprived it of intellectual legitimacy. At the same time, he was keen on giving space not only to liberal intellectuals, but also to conservative positions that were based on religious considerations, but still stated that women's education was permissible. In this way, the author created the illusion that all the legitimate political authorities had reached agreement on this issue. The aim of this textual fabrication was to convince a far wider audience than the participants in the "historical event," that composed by the

readers and listeners of *al-Raʾy al-ʿĀmm*. Audiences with different political sensibilities – conservatives and progressives alike – would have been able to identify with one or another of the positions described in the text, uttered by the most authoritative voices of their time, while at the same time being led to agree on the fact that women's education was not only permissible, but henceforth a national necessity.

2.5 New Discourses on Emancipation

In the years that followed, *al-ittiḥād al-nisāʾī al-sūdānī* chose the newspapers studied here as privileged platforms from which to describe the association's activities. Some examples are the creation of a women's clinic and the organisation of a yearly women's and children's festival.[38] These events and the media coverage they were given brought new members to the SWU, who in 1954 were estimated to number 400.[39] Through the press, the movement also asked women from other milieux to join them, hence articles such as "The word of the Women's Union to village girls" or "From the Women's Union to indigent girls."[40]

The call to "village girls" (women living in the rural areas) was already indicative of a shift in the discourses about gender relations: "You who are there in the villages, you don't know much about us, and we here, we only know what is brought by the press about you.[41] It is the man who fills the pages [of the press] with his opinions and his problems. My comrade [*zamīlatī*]: the time has really come for us to know each other better."[42] Here, the anonymous author outspokenly expressed her awareness – and criticism – of the fact that women journalists were occupying a masculine space. In the meantime, the core of this message was about the most fundamental mission of the SWU, to reach out to and connect with groups of women outside the small circle of the educated female elite.

This attention to vulnerable groups should be seen at the light of a historical juncture at which all the political movements with connections to nationalism were attempting to base their legitimacy on popular, non-elite support, and were

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38 Al-Duktūr Muṣṭafā al-Sayyid, "Ḥawla ʿIyādat al-Ittiḥād al-Nisāʾī [on the Women's Union's clinic]." *Al-Raʾy al-ʿĀmm*, 30.4.1953; "Mahrajān al-Marʾa wa-l-Ṭufūla Tashhaduhu al-Alāf [thousands of people watch the women's and children's festival]." *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 25.8.1953. Both in NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

39 Ibrāhīm Yass, "Al-Ittiḥād al-Nisāʾī [the Women's Union]." *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 8.6.1954, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

40 "Min al-Ittiḥād al-Nisāʾī ilā al-Fatāt al-Baʾīsa." *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 15.8.1952, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

41 Literally: "what is brought by the vehicle of the press."

42 "Kalimat al-Ittiḥād al-Nisāʾī ilā Fatāt al-Aqālīm." *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 1.8.1952, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

concerned with building a sense of nationhood by seeking to represent and co-opt heterogeneous political actors – who, as we have seen, were entering political life. However, it also reveals a change in political orientation within the SWU. Ḥājja Kāshif Badrī writes that the Union's first leader, Fāṭima al-Ṭālib, resigned before the end of her one-year term (Badrī 2009: 179). According to Badrī, this was because of her disagreements with the other members of the executive committee, a majority of whom were close to the SCP, and indeed Fāṭima al-Ṭālib later joined the Islamist movement. Although it sought to remain open to other political sensibilities, the movement was noteworthy for the increasing influence of Marxism, a tendency that came to its apogee with the leadership of Fāṭima Aḥmad Ibrāhīm from 1956.[43]

The growing visibility of the SWU and its increasingly left-wing stance led to significant changes in both the form and content of the articles female journalists wrote in the press, as can already be seen in the above quote. In *al-Ṣarāḥa*, the fictional figure of the "candid girl" disappeared after 1952 and was not replaced. Discussions about how women should accept domination by – and obedience to – their tutors, fathers, brothers, husbands and sons were eclipsed by other topics. One enlightening example of this is an article signed by "Miss N., a member of the Union" in 1953.[44] For Miss N., the condition of women had seen drastic deterioration since prehistoric times, when the means of subsistence changed from hunting and gathering to farming and cattle breeding – a discussion that shows the breadth of her reading. Men began to control the means of production, she continued, and women became a form of property "similar to any other property":

> Historians treat this crumbling of rights that women have experienced and their subjugation to men as a decisive defeat. [. . .]

> Each time [women] fail to provide for themselves, they will be relegated to a mere piece of property possessed by men, and under the yoke of their desires.

She also maintained that the situation had only been aggravated by colonisation, which took advantage of women's backwardness to prevent the nation from advancing. Here, men's relationship with women is not only one of domination, but "possession" – as with slaves – of a "piece of property". This relationship is no longer something to accept and interiorise, but the result of a "decisive defeat," to be fought against by women providing for themselves, that is by working. Another example is

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43 For a list of SWU heads, see Maḥmūd (2008: 159). Fāṭima A. Ibrāhīm headed it in 1956–58, followed by Khālda Zāhir (1958–1963), and then Fāṭima A. Ibrāhīm again from 1963 to. . . 2006!
44 Al-Ānisa N., "Al-Marʾa al-Sūdāniyya, Naḥwa ʿĀlam Jadīd [the Sudanese woman, towards a new world]." *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 9.9.1953, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

an article signed by a certain Ḥayāt Muṣṭafā in 1956[45] – we should note in passing that from this year on, journalists began signing their articles by their names. Ḥayāt Muṣṭafā tackled the question of women's participation in the Sudanese parliament. A small number of women had obtained the right to vote in 1953, but this was subject to age (they had to be over 25) and educational criteria (having the secondary school certificate) (Willis 2007).[46] What is more, women had still not gained the right to be elected as members of parliament. This ineligibility was the object of Muṣṭafā's attack:

> We demand our right to present ourselves at the next elections for one simple reason, which is that our community should be fully represented in the bodies that govern it. We make up half the nation, and nobody can deny that. If people see a difference between the lives of men and women it is because of the awful intervention of colonisation, which put women in a much lower position than men; but we are on the point of eliminating colonisation once and for all.

In her plea, the author bases her claims on the principle of democratic representation, which underlies the concept of equality of rights between men and women. She not only attributed women's position of inferiority to the impact of colonisation (something the "candid girl" had already alluded to), but also went further by affirming that once independence had been achieved, the subjugation of women would come to an end.

A final example of this discursive change is the response by an anonymous woman journalist in August 1956 to a talk on Radio Omdurman by a certain "Dr Bukhārī."[47] He had claimed in this broadcast that Sudanese women served the nation better "from inside their homes, by bringing up their children," and had also objected to the idea of opening kindergartens to allow women to go to work. The female journalist replied:

> Dr. Bukhārī admits that work would make women financially independent, which will later undoubtedly lead to freedom in terms of both personal income and the economy of the country. Does the doctor believe that women do not wish for this financial liberation, which lies at the heart of their problems, and which, once achieved, will guarantee her freedom and equality, and will relieve her of the oppression she suffers due to the fact that she cannot carry out a professional activity? How can this equality be established if women do not work? [. . .]

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45 Al-Ānisa Ḥayāt Muṣṭafā, "Ḥaqq al-Marʾa fī al-Intikhāb. Hal Huwa Muṭālaba bi-Akthar min al-Lāzim? [women's right to elections: is this demand an excessive one?]" *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 8.1.1956, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan. The first woman to be elected to parliament was Fāṭima A. Ibrāhīm in 1965.
46 Considering the rarity of this certificate, only a few hundred women could actually vote.
47 "Al-Marʾa wa-l-ʿAmal. Iʿtirāḍ al-Duktūr Bukhārī [women and work: the objection of Doctor Bukhari]." *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 12.8.1956, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

> He also rejected the idea of constructing kindergartens. He stated that modern medicine does not support such an intervention and recommends that the mother raises her children personally. [. . .] He used prostitutes [*āhirāt*] and criminals as examples and said that upon psychological analysis the reason for their corruption [*fasādihum*] is their upbringing away from the enveloping care and affection of the mother.

> I say to the doctor, with all due respect, that my knowledge of medicine does not surpass that of the average person in the street, but even so I can still say with certainty to those who share his opinion that the cause of this problem is exactly the opposite. Moral degradation is mainly caused by material problems, as we see in our reality in Sudan: you see that those who fall into the abyss of evil are usually driven by purely economic problems. When one becomes economically free, one will also be intellectually [*ʿaqliyyan*] and psychologically [*nafsiyyan*] free [. . .]

> Does the doctor believe that all mothers are capable of raising their children properly? Of course not! Specially here in Sudan, where the majority of women have absolutely no knowledge of correct children's education, and where all they have is charades and silly stories that stuff the child's mind with superstitions [*khurāfāt*] and harmful delusions [*awhām ḍārra*].

For the writer, women's problems were caused by their exclusion from the world of remunerated labour. Segregation in their homes made them economically dependent on a male family circle that could arbitrarily withdraw its support, as the "oppressed woman" had written six years earlier. However, the author did not believe that it was a man's affair to solve these problems, but insisted on the agency of women, on their role in obtaining financial independence, which was seen as the most important path to intellectual and spiritual freedom. It is also interesting to note the debate between the portrayal of women as a cause of moral decay ("prostitution and crime") if they are removed from their children and the idea that professional educators protected children from their uneducated mothers, and that in society, this "moral decay" was instead a function of "material problems." Last but not least, the building block of her argument in support of female work was the principle of equality: "How can this equality be established if women do not work?"

The demand that women should be able to enter the labour market on the same terms as men is a classic theme of the bourgeois feminist movement globally. Here, too, like many feminist writers dubbed as "bourgeois," the author of this article is silent about the fact that the vast majority of Sudanese women already worked outside their homes, and thus contributed financially to their households (and non-institutional kindergartens existed through the extended family). What is the reason behind this silence? Reading from the Sudanese context, the author was first of all concerned with the stigmatisation of women's remunerated work – without making any distinction for the type of labour. In maintaining that – any – work was a source of happiness and self-respect, an antidote to crime, prostitution

(which interestingly is not seen as a form of labour) and moral decay, she sought to change the value of feminine work and to fight the norm of middle- and upper-class seclusion. In this way, she indirectly addressed the stigmatisation of women who were already working, campaigning in favour of the idea that feminine work may be read not as a negative social fact but as a positive norm.

To conclude, the press articles from this later period reveal how both the discourse on the issue of women and the political sensibilities of the audience of readers and listeners were transformed. The outspoken texts and essays on the backwardness of women were replaced by programmatic articles in which the SWU described its work, projects and propositions, and in which journalists were not afraid to engage more explicitly in a "battle of the sexes."

At the same time, the SWU also became less dependent on a male audience of readers as it attempted to spread more widely among women. First, it sought to expand its circle of members and create regional branches outside the capital, and then it multiplied its social activities: it organised evening classes for women – according to Badrī, fifteen night-schools for women's literacy were founded between 1952 and 1958 (Badrī 2009: 91) – prepared yearly "women's week" fairs and founded clinics and nurseries. Female literacy rates grew exponentially during this period, even though they continued to affect only a tiny minority of women. Despite the fact that their activities were restricted by their limited financial resources, by social resistance and by internal divisions, what they still managed to achieve permitted the SWU's members to come into direct contact with – and make themselves visible among – a growing number of ordinary women who were still underexposed to the world of the press.

Conclusion

This chapter has described the participation of women intellectuals in the nationalist debates of Sudan on the eve of independence through their contribution to the Sudanese political press. It casts light on the importance of the press in the history of the women's movement, and on how women's contributions represented a powerful emancipatory strategy for them. At this historical juncture, Sudanese nationalist politicians invited all social actors to fight together to achieve national liberation, in spite of their differences in origins, class and gender. But for educated women, participating in the struggle meant demanding – and obtaining – political visibility. For the first time, they claimed to be best placed to design solutions for what they saw as the state of catastrophic backwardness of women, and the favoured platform for achieving that was writing to newspapers, a space that was

at the same time relatively secure, but also very powerful, considering the press's political importance at the time.

In order to interpret the contents of the articles authored by women journalists, as well as how they changed over time, I have sought to study them in the light of the issue of their readership. In the first sections of this chapter, I described Sudanese gendered reading habits, and in particular the fact that a newspaper's readership could extend far beyond people who actually knew how to read, even though the audience of listeners remained essentially male. This meant that the first women activists had limited opportunities to reach a female audience directly. In addition, the political legitimacy of these women writers still needed to be constructed. They had to fight against the stigmatisation associated with the public visibility of women, and to struggle to be accepted as interlocutors in the political space. All these elements converge to explain the nature of the texts published between 1950 and 1952 in particular, in which female journalists sought to address, stir up and jostle a male audience of readers and listeners through a form of strategic mimesis. Far from being self-referential and closed within the problems of a female bourgeoisie, these texts were directed towards the expectations and sensitivities of a male audience, in accordance with their fundamentally pedagogical nature. In spite of this mimesis, women writers were still able to introduce revolutionary notions into their texts, such as the contingent nature of male domination or men's failure to perform their patriarchal role.

This sensitivity – or even subordination – to a male readership evolved quickly in the 1950s and 1960s as women activists became increasingly integrated into the progressive intellectual milieu. This was crucial for a number of reasons. At a very practical level, these changes gave the women movement more visibility in newspapers. In the case of the SWU, we have seen that its creation was largely announced, covered and supported by Sudanese intellectuals writing in the press. Events were organised that created the fiction of a general consensus on women's increasing national responsibilities. This led ordinary readers to become accustomed to the women's movement, and to gradually stop questioning whether it was needed, and whether or not it was legitimate. The consolidation of the movement, on the other hand, meant that women journalists stopped endorsing denigrating discourses tailored for a male audience, and instead sought to build bridges with ordinary and vulnerable women.

In the end, other kinds of discourse emerged to replace the previous ones: on the one hand, they took up the causes of the struggle against inequalities between women and men in a Marxist-inspired economic and political framework, and on the other they promoted a new model of "the Sudanese woman," who was not only educated but also a worker who was economically independent from her companion. This shows us the embeddedness of writers and their audiences and their

mutual influences: the female journalists of the 1950s played an essential role in sensitising individuals to their struggles, and at the same time the form and content of their writings changed as these sensitivities came to accept their presence in the public space.

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